Reshaping the Domestic and International Landscape

Part One

The Long Road to the 1980 Presidential Election

It is easy to believe that Ronald Reagan’s path to the presidency was never in question. He had emerged unscathed from the 1968 race for the GOP nomination and was reelected governor of the most populous state in the country by a half-million-vote margin two years later. His political prominence and viability seemed not to have suffered severely from his failure to win his party’s presidential nomination in either 1968 or 1976. No other Republican presidential hopeful had such strong credentials going into the late 1970s. As to his Democratic competition, the incumbency advantage (every president since Herbert Hoover who sought reelection had been victorious) that should have helped President Jimmy Carter was clearly limited by the Iranian hostage crisis, the seemingly unsolvable energy crisis, and an economy that seemed to be spiraling out of control.

These macroeconomic and political factors may explain the outcome of the 1980 election; it is widely assumed that voters punished Carter for America’s economic and political failures. But this version of
events does not explain why Reagan emerged as the Republican nominee rather than some other leading contender such as George H. W. Bush, Senators Howard Baker or Robert Dole, or former Texas governor John Connally. And in emphasizing Carter’s misfortune, it fails to acknowledge the artistry required to create an unusually broad coalition, especially from a politician who had long been associated with the Far Right. Explaining how this was done is our concern.

Despite mounting economic, energy, and foreign policy crises and news headlines predicting disaster upon further disaster, Dick Wirthlin, one of Reagan’s key strategists, was sober about his candidate’s prospects. With slightly more than four months remaining before the 1980 election, he warned that “unseating Jimmy Carter will be extremely difficult, even unlikely.” Wirthlin and others believed that in order to take advantage of voter dissatisfaction, particularly with Carter’s economic policies, Reagan would have to present a message substantially different from that which he had offered in his 1976 presidential campaign and his more tenuous effort to win his party’s 1968 presidential nomination.

Politics had changed since the era of the smoke-filled room. The expanded political environment still allowed for the influence of the party faithful, but as Wirthlin observed in 1980, “[T]he party bosses are gone and nothing has replaced them. Direct primaries have diminished the role and power of party organizations.” Political scientist Gerald Pomper agreed with Wirthlin:

By 1980, primaries were used in 37 states and territories, and determined three-fourths of the delegates. Aspirants to the White House no longer needed to win the favor of party leaders; they could take their case directly to the voters in these primaries (even if only a minority of those eligible actually voted). Because the delegates chosen also were pledged to particular candidates, the opportunities for any convention bargaining among uncommitted blocs were limited. The primaries could no longer be delivered to the Republican front-runner or the person chosen by party leaders with the same certainty that was possible just a few years earlier. Rhetoric and heresthetic became much more valuable in the new, more open institutional context. As Pomper has also noted, “By 1980, a new system was established, in which individual candidates were the major actors who
sought to influence the polls, the media, and the primaries, while paying little notice to party leaders.”

Reagan thrived in this institutional environment in which the selectorate was much larger and less bound to party leaders and in which candidates had to communicate directly with millions of potential supporters on a regular basis. As the primaries became more important, Reagan’s message—focused as it was on proposals for what he believed would be better public policies rather than delivering favors to party elites—expanded to encompass a broader and more diverse selectorate.

Selectorate theory hypothesizes that the large coalition needed to support a leader—a coalition of millions by 1980—is highly susceptible to defections or changes from within. Such challenges were apparent in the 1980 race. Carter was highly susceptible to defections as the size of the selectorate and winning coalition grew even within his own party. Carter needed political artistry more in 1980 than he did in 1976; he needed some appeal that would keep dissatisfied selectors from defecting.

The loss of power by the South in the Republican Party was an institutional feature of the 1980 presidential race that suggested that even at the stage of the primaries, contenders would have to present a broad message, as opposed to targeting a specific or narrow audience that in earlier campaigns was central to securing the nomination of one’s party. Carter’s success in 1976 was due in no small measure to the fact that he carried the South. He won all southern states except Virginia. While southerners basked in having one of their own in the Oval Office, 1980 Republican Party convention rules moved “southern Republicans . . . from the highest to the lowest number of delegates since the area suffered officeholder losses and only carried one state for president.” Unlike the 1976 Republican primaries, where Reagan spoke largely to his base, in the 1980 primaries he would need to speak to a truly national audience. This perforce meant that at the very start of the campaign season Reagan would be going after the potential defectors that Carter was trying to hold to his side.

Candidates typically build coalitions by means of rhetoric, but in 1980 Reagan took a heresthetical turn. His strategy was based on the politics of more—more defense spending, more wealth, more optimism, more everything—and a message of winning instead of managing the Cold War. This would have been a risky strategy for any presidential candidate. Indeed, no Cold War president had ever tried it. But Reagan was able to feel confident in his strategy because he had been testing it
as a rhetorician for many years, especially during the late 1970s. Even during those periods when he was out of office, he had remained in close contact with his audience. As we noted earlier, he did so through his radio commentary, newspaper column, and speeches, as well as through prolific letter writing as a means of responding to questions and criticism about his statements and political activities. This unique opportunity to be in continuous contact with his audience allowed Reagan to identify messages that would appeal to a much broader set of voters than he previously had attracted.

Cast of Characters and the Political Context

As stated in the previous chapter, Ronald Reagan restarted his nationally syndicated radio program and nationally syndicated newspaper column soon after the Republican convention ended on August 19, 1976. In January 1977, he announced that he was creating another avenue to promote conservative ideas, Citizens for the Republic (CFTR), a new political action committee (PAC) funded with $1.5 million left over from his 1976 presidential campaign. Lyn Nofziger, who had served as Reagan’s press aide during some of his years as governor, became CFTR’s executive director. The CFTR office opened in Santa Monica on February 10. CFTR began sponsoring many of Reagan’s speaking engagements to endorse Republican candidates and promote conservative causes. The PAC had become yet another vehicle by which Reagan could build his Republican base and keep his party’s message alive. Although he was as yet an undeclared candidate, and many in his own camp were not even certain that he would run in 1980, Reagan had once again constructed the workings of an effective stealth campaign.5

The Carter campaign of 1976 galvanized a diverse constituency. Organized labor returned to the Democratic fold from its defection four years earlier. Carter won 63 percent of the union vote, 57 percent of the Catholic vote, and 82 percent of the overall Democratic vote. Ford received more popular votes than Carter in the Midwest and the West, but the South returned to the Democrats, with all states except Virginia delivering their electoral votes to Carter. Carter was also victorious in the East. The Georgian even made inroads into segments of society that had traditionally voted Republican, and a high percentage of those with college educations and in the professions, including business, delivered their vote to Carter-Mondale.
Despite his belief that he could revive the old New Deal coalition, Carter was not standing on terribly solid political ground when he assumed the presidency on January 20, 1977. He had won the South largely thanks to overwhelming support from poor whites and black voters. Ford had begun to cut into his lead during the final days of the campaign, as was reflected in the final results, which showed Carter with 50.1 percent of the popular vote to Ford’s 48 percent, and 297 electoral votes to Ford’s 240. It was the closest presidential race since Charles Evan Hughes, a Supreme Court justice and former governor of New York, nearly defeated President Woodrow Wilson in 1916.

In a memo to Carter written a few weeks after the 1976 presidential election, his pollster, Patrick Caddell, assessed the outlook:

1. Governor Carter’s political situation is precarious for a Democrat. Any loss that he sustains among the nontraditional groups which supported him in 1976 that is not compensated for among other groups would put his political future in danger.

2. The Democratic party is in serious national trouble—with a shrinking and ill-defined coalition. We need a new and broader political coalition that can attract new support. It would be a mistake, however, to try to create an all-inclusive coalition. Indeed, one decision that must be made is which groups ought not to participate in the coalition. A decision on who to exclude will make clearer both who should participate and how—strategy should be formed.

Caddell’s memo was prescient. After the inauguration Carter quickly began losing ground with both the traditional Democratic base and his nontraditional supporters. His approval ratings, according to Gallup Poll, reached as high as 75 percent during his first months in office, but then dropped into a downward spiral that continued for years (albeit with brief spikes tied to specific events): by late July 1978, his ratings were down to 39 percent, and by July 1980 they had declined even further to 21 percent. The national survey organization reported that the latter rating was “the lowest recorded for any president since the Gallup Poll initiated these measures in 1938.” The final assessment of his job performance was 34 percent. Carter was being negatively evaluated by virtually every segment of society.

Looking ahead to the 1980 race, Reagan was the Republican front-
runner, but other contenders were important because, if for no other reason, they forced him to define his campaign and policy positions. And, of course, as the experience of 1968’s front-runner, George Romney, showed, the leading candidate early in the process may well not be the nominee at the end of the process. With a Democrat as the incumbent, the Republicans had a much larger field of candidates in 1980 than they had in 1976. These included, in addition to Reagan, Representative John Anderson of Illinois; Senator Howard Baker of Tennessee; former Texas congressman and Central Intelligence Agency director George H. W. Bush; Representative Philip Crane of Illinois; former Texas governor and Nixon secretary of the treasury John Connally; Senator Robert Dole of Kansas; California businessman Benjamin Fernandez; Senator Larry Pressler of South Dakota; former Minnesota governor Harold Stassen; and Senator Lowell Weicker of Connecticut. Gerald Ford remained popular in the party and was also available to run if his party called upon him.\footnote{9}

Bush and Reagan were the only Republicans to take first place in any of the primaries, while Anderson, Baker, Bush, Connally, and Reagan took second place in various races. The balance of power in the Republican contest was reflected in a variety of statements made by the contenders. Five weeks after Reagan declared his candidacy, Baker said, “Ronald Reagan is the name of the game as far as I’m concerned, and we’ve got to play catch-up ball.” Bob Dole quipped, “I tell people if they’re looking for a younger Ronald Reagan with experience, I’m available.”\footnote{10} While the others were campaigning to win the nomination, as political scientist Gerald Pomper has observed, Reagan “needed only to avoid losing it.”\footnote{11}

Baker withdrew from the race on March 5, 1980, less than two months into the primary season, and Connally and Dole quickly followed suit. Crane announced his exit on April 17, and on April 24 Anderson declared that he would run as an independent. Bush abandoned his attempt to win the GOP nomination a month later, but did not formally withdraw. Anderson and Bush in particular remained actively involved in the race, vying for the support of liberal and moderate Republicans. Other candidates either closed their campaigns or failed to establish themselves as serious contenders. When the dust settled in July, it was Bush who accepted the number two spot on the Reagan ticket at the Detroit convention.

Bush had extensive experience in Washington. In addition to his service as CIA director, he had served as a two-term congressman from
Texas as well as U.S. ambassador to the United Nations, chairman of
the Republican National Committee, and chief U.S. liaison officer to
the People’s Republic of China. Clearly, it was not Bush’s credentials
that worried his conservative Republican critics; they were more con-
cerned that he would refuse to support Reagan’s agenda and the party’s
platform. After all, this was the man who had called Reagan’s tax pro-
posals “voodoo economics” during the primaries. But Bush signed on
to the Reagan plan, including its opposition to the use of federal fund-
ing for abortions. Many of those in the Reagan camp who had
expressed reservations about this “marriage of convenience” gradually
came to appreciate Bush’s energetic and loyal efforts on behalf of the
campaign.12

John Anderson was the main third-party candidate in the 1980 pres-
didential race. A 10-term moderate Republican congressman from Illi-
nois, Anderson had become disillusioned with his party and announced
as an independent. He sought the support of a coalition of liberals and
moderates who he believed were disillusioned with both parties and
supported a platform based around a gas tax, the revenues from which
would be funneled into Social Security while Social Security taxes
would be reduced; protection for pro-choice legislation; the Equal
Rights Amendment; and a reduction in federal spending without sub-
stantial cuts in personal income taxes.13

In 1980, 52 percent of the U.S. electorate identified itself as Demo-
cratic, 13 percent as independent, and 33 percent as Republican.14 Both
Carter and Reagan therefore needed to win substantial support from
independents and moderates. Anderson’s campaign posed a serious
challenge to both contenders, but he was generally expected to cut most
deeply into Carter’s liberal base in key areas such as Illinois, New
England, and New York.15

Four months after declaring himself an independent, Anderson
selected Patrick J. Lucey, the former two-term Democratic governor of
Wisconsin, as his running mate. Lucey was a progressive liberal who
had supported both John F. and Robert Kennedy, and supported Ted
Kennedy’s 1980 presidential bid until resigning to join the Anderson
ticket. “[I]t was hard,” Mark Bisnow notes, “to avoid the conclusion
that the campaign was making a bald appeal for Kennedy Democrats
unhappy with Carter.” Indeed, Anderson’s campaign steadily drifted
left as he reached out to traditional Democratic constituencies and var-
ious cause-oriented liberals.16 The leftward move cost Anderson some
of his Republican support, thereby relieving the pressure on Reagan,
but it simultaneously forced Carter to appeal to the Kennedy wing of
the party without alienating his more conservative base.

Anderson’s third-party “national unity” campaign played an impor-
tant role in the 1980 presidential contest. Unlike George Wallace, who
withdrawed from the 1976 competition in favor of his party’s nominee,
Anderson campaigned throughout the 1980 race, taking votes from
Carter and Reagan along the way and influencing the manner in which
both men framed issues and constructed coalitions.

On the Democratic side, California governor Jerry Brown and
Massachusetts senator Ted Kennedy posed potentially serious chal-
lenges to Carter’s renomination bid. Both campaigns invoked their can-
didates’ commitment to liberal causes and policies, weakening Carter’s
hold on the left-center coalition he so urgently needed. Brown receded
as quickly as he had emerged, withdrawing from the race on April 1
without having won a single primary. Kennedy announced his candi-
dacy the day before Brown’s November entry into the race, but the data
suggested that the American electorate had considered him a serious
contender since at least the early 1970s. Carter himself was faltering in
the polls in the fall of 1979, but his popularity ratings improved in the
wake of the crisis at the Iranian embassy that began early that Novem-
ber, and he handily beat both Anderson and Reagan in presidential trial
heats conducted by the Gallup Poll between January and July 1980. As
the nation rallied around the president during the early months of the
Iranian hostage crisis, Kennedy was unable to help his candidacy by
criticizing the president’s Iran policy. Thus, as Kennedy biographer
Adam Clymer has written, Kennedy “dropped” the issue of Iran.

Kennedy never succeeded in undermining the president’s standing
but posed a serious threat nonetheless. His 10 primary victories (to
Carter’s 24) allowed him to stay in the race until the Democratic con-
vention in mid-August, pushing Carter steadily to the left. Even as he
was preparing to withdraw from the race and endorse Carter at the
convention, Kennedy and his camp were still fighting for liberal planks
in the party platform. Kennedy’s proposals were approved by the dele-
gates, and although Carter rejected the details of his rival’s jobs-cre-
ation proposal, for example, he felt compelled to promise that he
would “implement its spirit and its aims.”

During the first eight months of 1980, Carter had to fend off chal-
lenges from all sides. Brown and Kennedy were after his support base
on the left. Anderson was now attracting support from liberals as well
as those in the center. And Reagan’s appeal among conservative Demo-
When Jimmy Carter first took office in January 1977, the American economy was on the upswing; inflation and unemployment were decreasing, and the recession had subsided. The president initially sought to beat back unemployment even further, but after almost two years in office declared that inflation was the greater problem. By that time, however, Reagan had been broadcasting commentaries about the insidious effects of inflation for several years. He, rather than the president, was most closely associated with concern about inflation and its solutions. As noted in the previous chapter, one of Reagan’s very first radio commentaries after he stepped down as governor of California in January 1975 was titled simply “Inflation.”

By the fall of 1976, Reagan was pulling in the strands of his heres-thetical argument, weaving together issues like tax cuts as a means to revive the American economy and replacing traditional policies of contain-ment and détente with a military strategy that would peacefully replace the Cold War’s domination of the international system with a larger community of free states. No matter how coherent a message is, however, it will be of little heresthetical value if it is not successfully connected to a coalition. On January 15, 1977, five days before Carter was sworn in as president, Reagan took a major step towards becoming a true heresthetician—and a successful presidential candidate—when he successfully identified the elements of this coalition in a speech to conservatives at the Mayflower Hotel in Washington, DC:

You know, as I do, that most experts and commentators make a distinction between what they call “social” conservatism and “economic” conservatism. The so-called social issues—law and order, abortion, busing, quota systems—are usually associated with blue-collar, ethnic and religious groups themselves tradi- tionally associated with the Democratic Party. The economic issues—inflation, deficit spending and big government—are usually associated with Republican Party members and Independents who concentrate their attention on economic matters.

Now I am willing to accept this view of two major kinds of
conservatism—or, better still, two different conservative constituencies. But at the same time let me say that the old lines that once clearly divided these two kinds of conservatism are disappearing.

Reagan then proposed a way to bind social and economic conservatives:

It was only a few years ago that the word “inflation” was something found only in the vocabulary of economists, Republican spokesmen and some editorial writers. But go into any supermarket in America today, stop a man or woman pushing a cart filled with groceries, and mention the word “inflation.” . . .

Inflation has become what the political pros call a “gut” issue. It’s no longer the exclusive worry of hard-line conservative economists or spokesmen for free enterprise. It hits home because it hurts the working man and woman. . . .

Is it possible to combine the two major segments of contemporary American conservatism into one politically effective whole?

Yes it is possible to create a political entity that will reflect the views of the great, hitherto, unorganized conservative majority. . . .

What I envision is not simply a melding together of the two branches of American conservatism into a temporary uneasy alliance, but the creation of a new, lasting majority.

This will mean compromise. But not a compromise of basic principle. What will emerge will be something new, something open and vital and dynamic, something the great conservative majority will recognize as its own, because at the heart of this undertaking is principled politics.

Later in his speech, he made a pitch for the black vote as part of this same coalition:

The New Republican Party I envision is still going to be the party of Lincoln and that means we are going to have to come to grips with what I consider to be a major failing of the party: its failure to attract the majority of black voters.

It’s time black America and the New Republican Party move
toward each other and create a situation in which no black vote can be taken for granted.

Reagan went on to reiterate this vision in subsequent addresses. In a speech on June 8, 1977, in Westmoreland County, Pennsylvania, he discussed his goal of turning the Republican Party into a “new majority” party comprised of Democrats seeking a new political home, Republicans, and independents. By the time of his September 5, 1978, stump speech on behalf of a California legislator, Reagan was not only calling for the coalition of economic and social conservatives and a new majority, he was encapsulating this vision in the five words that would ultimately frame his campaign: family, work, neighborhood, freedom, and peace. Speaking before the California Republican Assembly in Los Angeles on March 24, 1979, Reagan continued to press his case, describing the Republican Party as a bigger tent than its reputation allowed: “I know I have said this before, but I repeat we are not a narrow band of ideologues. . . . We are the party of the people—the people of main street and the farm.”

From 1977 onward Reagan continued to refine his message and deliver it to millions of Americans. The core of his platform was that tax cuts and a robust defense policy could be accompanied by substantial decreases in inflation, and that a massive American military buildup would make the United States more secure because military superiority would dissuade any potential challenger from attacking the United States. Furthermore, military strength coupled with a restoration of international credibility, which Reagan believed was connected to both military power and living up to international commitments and agreements, would make the United States a more attractive alternative to the Soviet model. Reagan believed that as strength and credibility helped improve the post-Vietnam reputation of the United States, the international system would begin to be transformed from the bipolar status quo to a larger zone of economically and politically free states. He stopped short of declaring that his proposed direction for foreign and defense policy would end the Cold War, but he unabashedly charged that a radical departure from containment and détente was in order.

One of the most prominent aspects of the economic message Reagan would advocate in his 1980 presidential campaign began to take shape in 1977. On July 14, Republican congressmen Jack Kemp of New York and William Roth of Delaware introduced a bill that would reduce per-
sonal income tax rates 10 percent a year for three years, lower corpo-
rate taxes, and provide tax relief for small businesses. Reagan immedi-
ately advocated the bill in his radio commentaries and speeches.24 His
early endorsement of the Kemp-Roth bill contributed to Reagan’s
already strong reputation as an advocate of tax cuts well before the
1980 presidential race began.

Of course, Reagan was not the first American to decide inflation was
a national economic problem. By the late 1970s polls were consistently
showing that Americans considered inflation an urgent issue. But Rea-
gan, who had been speaking and writing about it for many years and
on a regular basis since at least 1975, was positioned to exploit this con-
cern. In his December 14, 1978, speech to the Los Angeles World Affairs
Council, Reagan presented a refined position on inflation: “[T]here is
but one cause of inflation, and that is government itself.”25 The text of
his radio commentaries shows that Reagan was also sifting through
scholarly and policy literature for proposals on reducing inflation. His
comprehensive solution to the problem was still a couple of years away,
but Reagan was already establishing himself as an anti-inflation war-
rior in much the same way that he had accrued his bona fides on the tax
issue.

Reagan was not alone in discerning that, by 1978, large numbers of
Americans had become concerned that Soviet expansionism was threat-
ening American military power, and supported a robust defense policy.
Public opinion polling confirmed these findings.26 Reagan was con-
vinced that the American public was prepared for peacetime rearma-
ment, even with the humiliation of Vietnam still smoldering in recent
memory. This belief fueled Reagan’s heresthetical appeal, which held
that massive increases in defense spending would make the United
States more secure and help avoid war.

Reagan distinguished himself from Carter and from his Republican
challengers by the way he interpreted the public mood, the issues he
sought to make salient to voters, and the positions he took on those
issues. He also set himself apart by interweaving public concerns with
his own long-standing views. These tactics shielded him from efforts by
other Republican presidential hopefuls to undercut support from
within his own party, while simultaneously fracturing the loose coali-
tion that had elected Carter president four years earlier. Carter needed
the full support of those who voted for him in 1976 to retain the White
House in 1980, but Reagan had been gaining their support from the
moment the 1976 election was over.
Gary Hart, the former Democratic senator from Colorado and presidential candidate, recently captured the essence of heresetical maneuvering in an essay for the New York Times Book Review: “Truly great leaders possess a strategic sense, an inherent understanding of how the framework of their thinking and the tides of the times fit together and how their nation’s powers should be applied to achieve its larger purposes.”27 One could hardly imagine a more accurate description of Ronald Reagan in the late 1970s.

The governor’s heresetical appeal was that economic growth would be spurred by abandoning policies based on the old Keynesian theory of federal involvement in the economy. The economic malaise of the 1970s had not been a natural consequence of American decline, he argued, but was caused by excesses in government spending and regulation—excesses that could be reversed through tax cuts, a stable monetary policy, a reduction in the rate of growth of government spending, and less burdensome regulatory policies.

Reagan was not starting from scratch in 1980: his long climb up the economic learning curve reached across many campaigns. Nor was Reagan ever acting alone: over time, he had attracted an extremely savvy group of advisers and staff. But neither experience nor personnel would suffice: the campaign needed a clear strategy.

This strategy began to come together on March 7, 1979, when Senator Paul Laxalt (R-NV) announced the formation of the Reagan for President Committee. Unlike Reagan’s 1976 campaign, which was announced with only a handful of supporters, his 1980 effort was launched with 365 backers from the GOP and nearly every segment of society. Laxalt, the committee’s chair, made it known that this time Reagan would campaign as a centrist.28

Economic policies would be crucial to winning the center. In the months that followed, Martin Anderson, Reagan’s domestic policy adviser, was nagged by his candidate’s lack of a comprehensive economic plan that would appeal to the diverse segments of society that a centrist Reagan would need to reach. Anderson recalls, “Over the years he [Reagan] . . . studied and took positions on most major economic issues. He had not proposed any overall economic plan for the country, but he was convinced that tax rates, particularly those on people’s earnings, were too high, that a lot of government regulations were of minimal benefit and hurt the economy. He felt our monetary policy was erratic and our currency unsound . . . [and this] in turn had a powerful impact on the economy.”29 Anderson undertook to
put Reagan’s economic ideas down on paper in one comprehensive statement.

By August, Anderson was ready to present Policy Memorandum Number 1. Relying on themes that Reagan had repeated in his broadcasts and speeches and arguments that noted economists had been making, Anderson identified inflation as “the main domestic problem facing the United States today, not only for its pure economic effects, but also because of its negative social and political consequences.” He then proposed five measures to transform the American economy: (1) speed up economic growth through a reduction in taxation and government regulations; (2) eliminate government waste and excess spending and grant the president a line-item veto as a means of controlling government spending; (3) balance the budget; (4) establish a stable monetary policy and devise a constitutional amendment to ban wage and price controls, except in cases of national emergency; and (5) further amend the Constitution with an “Economic Bill of Rights” limiting government spending, requiring a balanced federal budget, prohibiting wage and price controls, creating the line-item veto, and requiring a two-thirds approval by Congress on major spending initiatives. Reagan had already endorsed every component of this plan at some point in time, generally in his radio commentaries. But the memo was an important contribution to coalescing Reagan’s heresthetical message in the 1980 campaign.

On another front, the governor’s message on foreign and defense policy was also taking shape. Reagan had been an active anti-Communist throughout most of his professional life, and he campaigned on an anti-Communist platform in both 1968 and 1976. By the late 1970s, however, his hypotheses about U.S.-Soviet relations had evolved into an alternative way to think about the Cold War.

Reagan’s thinking on the issue was solidly based on four separate hypotheses. Each of these ideas had been put forward by other conservative writers and politicians at various times. But no presidential contender had embraced them together as a complete way of analyzing the Cold War. Indeed, doing so was a kind of political and intellectual heresy at the height of U.S.-Soviet détente.

The first hypothesis, which Reagan had expounded as early as the 1960s, was that the Soviet economy was so weak that it could not survive an intense technology race with the United States. In a speech he delivered around 1963, Reagan spoke of “the shaky Russian economy” and its “limping industrial complex.” He speculated that the Soviet economy would “come unhinged” if the United States stopped helping
the satellite states of the Eastern bloc and forced the USSR to take up its full burden of obligations. He returned to this idea during an Oregon news conference in June 1977, in which he suggested that we tell the Soviets “we’re going to turn our industrial machinery into developing weapons . . . and make them believe it.” By doing so, he argued, the United States could force the Soviet Union to surrender the arms race.31

His second hypothesis held that the occupying Red Army was the Soviet Union’s sole source of legitimacy in Eastern Europe. He did not see the Soviet bloc as a genuine alliance, and asserted that if the army pulled out, the bloc’s client states would go their own way.32

Reagan’s third hypothesis was that the American economy was strong enough to withstand a period of intense military competition with the Soviet Union. And his fourth hypothesis (mentioned earlier) was that, despite the recent failure in Vietnam, the American public was prepared to rearm for the purpose of transforming the international system away from the Cold War and toward a larger zone of economically and politically free states. His radio commentaries and speeches are replete with calls for military preparedness, and his July 7, 1978, newspaper column took issue with “McGovernites . . . . [C]onvinced that the American public and Congress would never support . . . increased defense expenditures.”33

In a speech in Los Angeles on December 14, 1978, Reagan referred to “polls [that] show a majority of Americans wanting some kind of arms control agreement to ensure peace, while at the same time expressing concern about our falling behind the Soviets.”34 It was clear by then that Reagan was going to campaign on the proposition that America was over its Vietnam Syndrome of decreased military spending and wariness of foreign entanglements.

He did not go into detail on this matter during the campaign, but there was evidence throughout the years that Reagan was looking toward a post-Soviet world. In his early 1960s speech referred to earlier, Reagan embraced the belief “that in an all out race our system is stronger, and eventually the enemy gives up the race as a hopeless cause. Then a noble nation believing in peace extends the hand of friendship and says there is room in the world for both of us. We can make those rockets into bridge lamps by being so strong the enemy has no choice, or we can bet our lives and freedom on the cockeyed theory that if we make him strong enough he’ll learn to love us.”35

In January 1977, the same month during which he first defined his coalition of social and economic conservatives, Reagan offered his
stark vision of the Cold War endgame to Richard V. Allen, an interna-
tional relations scholar. “My view is that we win and they lose,” he
said. In Reagan’s thinking it was that simple. An all-out race would
force the Soviet Union to acknowledge America’s economic and politi-
cal superiority. Allen later wrote that he “was flabbergasted. I’d
worked for Nixon and Goldwater and many others, and I’d heard a lot
about Kissinger’s policy of détente and about the need to ‘manage the
Cold War,’ but never did I hear a leading politician put the goal so
starkly.”

Impressed by these ideas, Allen joined Reagan’s presidential cam-
paign. By the summer of 1978, he was helping the governor develop a
cohesive set of foreign and national security policy themes, akin to
what Martin Anderson would do on the economic side the following
summer. In a 14-page memo to Reagan titled “The ‘Strategy for Peace’
Theme,” Allen outlined an overarching national security position for
the campaign that built upon Reagan’s criticism of U.S.-Soviet détente
during his 1976 presidential campaign. In effect, Allen was building an
entire platform around Reagan’s belief in the need for the United States
to change the way it fought the Cold War. He offered a lengthy critique
détente, arguing that the Soviet Union had never accepted the code
of conduct that President Nixon and his national security adviser
Henry Kissinger had expected. The result, he argued, was “strategic
asymmetry.” Allen saw the Reagan “Strategy for Peace” as a radical
alternative to the détente policies of the Nixon-Ford-Carter years.

Reagan’s new foreign policy adviser cautioned that this would
require a shift in rhetoric: “It will be crucially important to move away
from discussing the merits of specific weapons systems (such as the
great penetration capabilities of the B-1, the ‘humaneness’ of the neu-
tron bomb) because it can be made to appear that you are fascinated
with and ‘like’ weapons for what they can accomplish, and to move
toward discussing the requirements of a grand strategy.”

The first step toward this grand strategy would be to link defense
policy to the economy. Allen wrote: “A sound and credible national
security policy requires a strong and dynamic domestic economy, one
in which the productive forces and creative genius of the American
people are given free rein and are not stifled, by the Federal Govern-
ment. Hence, the first line of our defense must be an economy capable
of sustaining America’s leadership position in the world and inspiring
trust and confidence in our ability to manage well our own affairs.”
This line of reasoning was fully consistent with Reagan’s Cold War
hypothesis about the durability of the American economy in the face of revved-up military competition with the Soviet Union.

Reagan’s grand strategy would also be based on what Allen described as an “enunciated national purpose capable of being understood by friend and foe alike.” He did not outline the details of this deterrent strategy, but his memo suggested a clear break with traditional reliance on containment and détente. As Allen remarked in the concluding paragraph of his memo, “[T]he notion that there is a Ronald Reagan ‘Strategy For Peace’ will become an important part of your campaign arsenal.”

The governor needed to run on a peace plan in 1980: a telephone survey taken by the Gallup Poll in the midst of the primaries had found that 46 percent of those questioned thought Carter would be more likely to keep the country out of war than Reagan, compared to 31 percent in favor of the challenger. Encouraged by this finding, Carter would try to capitalize on Reagan’s trigger-happy image throughout the campaign.

Meanwhile, Reagan was expressing a range of other, similarly radical views about national defense, questioning the wisdom of a deterrence strategy based on Mutual Assured Destruction and negotiated limits on antimissile defense: “There once was the beginning of a defense; an anti ballistic missile system which we had invented and which the Soviets didn’t have. We bargained that away in exchange for nothing. Instead of a defense against their missiles we settled for something called mutual destruction. . . . Today there is reason to question that [MAD] is an adequate defense.” At the time of these words, spoken during a radio commentary taped in September 1979, Reagan stood alone among the Republican presidential contenders in his argument that the conventional deterrence strategy should be jettisoned.

Although missile defense would eventually become part of the 1980 GOP platform, Reagan did not emphasize his positions on missile defense and MAD during the campaign. It seems that the governor’s camp chose not to publicize his unconventional views in order to avoid exposing themselves to attacks from Carter. The fact remains, however, that Reagan was campaigning on the radical notion that the American conventions of containment and deterrence were wrongheaded and had relegated the country to second-place status.

Despite widespread expectations that he would favor abandonment of nuclear arms control negotiations with the Soviets, the presumptive Republican presidential nominee in fact supported continued talks,
although under dramatically revised terms. Speaking at a gathering of Republicans in San Diego on September 15, 1979, he pronounced SALT II to be “fatally flawed,” but suggested that “the negotiators . . . go back to the table and come up with a treaty which fairly and genuinely reduces the number of strategic nuclear weapons.”

By mid-1979, the New York Times was reporting that Reagan had softened his tone on defense policy: “Intentionally or not, the fact is that Mr. Reagan sounds much less aggressive on foreign affairs now than he did in 1976. . . . These days, however, his basic foreign-policy speech emphasizes the relative weakness of the American economy and Presidential indecision about defense priorities. It is a calm, reasoned, and even dull speech.”

The radio commentaries often hinted more strongly at the fire in Reagan’s belly: this was certainly due in part to the nature of the medium. There was a strategic preference in Reagan’s 1980 presidential campaign, however, to employ measured rhetoric to turn conventional defense thinking on its head.

Reagan’s official announcement of his presidential campaign in late 1979 laid out the candidate’s unconventional ideas about the economy and defense policy, and his goals for arms-reduction talks with the Soviets. The announcement also endorsed the Kemp-Roth bill as the savior of the American economy: “The key to restoring the health of the economy lies in cutting taxes. . . . Proposals such as the Kemp-Roth bill would bring about . . . realistic reductions in tax rates.” On foreign policy, Reagan warned that U.S.-Soviet negotiations “must never become appeasement,” but he also said that “we should leave no initiative untried in our pursuit of peace.” Furthermore, he took the opportunity to propose a North American Accord among Canada, Mexico, and the United States, on the grounds that such an agreement would enhance security in the Western Hemisphere.

Reagan’s proposals for the 1980 presidential race struck a much more modest rhetorical note than he had favored in 1976, but that modesty belied the fact that his proposals fundamentally challenged conventional economic and strategic assumptions. A rhetorician may accuse his opponent of incompetence or a lack of ideas, but only a heresthetician can convince voters that his opponent is so fundamentally misguided as to be talking about the wrong issues. Reagan was thinking heresthetically when he told voters that American leaders, including President Carter, had for decades completely misunderstood the Cold War. And he was doing it again when he claimed that his tax-cut plan would offset the negative effects of increased defense spending.
Of course, the adoption of unconventional policies is just the first step toward heresthetical success. After all, the American public always had the option of rejecting Reagan’s ideas. The successful heresthetician must not only present a new way of thinking, but must also articulate positions in a way that backs opponents into a corner. If opponents so much as acknowledge any element of the heresthetician’s argument, they risk losing large segments of their own coalition. In the end, the heresthetician must dominate the issues that will attract support. Reagan was applying all of these tactics in the late 1970s.

On January 7, 1977, two weeks before he was sworn in as president, Jimmy Carter proposed an economic stimulus package designed to reduce unemployment and create jobs. He amended this plan on January 22 and again on the twenty-fifth, adding a $50 tax rebate for individuals and tax credits for businesses that made new hires and increased their investments. He rescinded these proposals four months later out of concern that they might fuel further inflation. To bring inflation under control, the president now argued, business, government, and labor would have to work together more closely and the country would need “the voluntary cooperation and restraint of the American people.” In other words, Carter was calling for national sacrifice at the beginning of his White House tenure. The call for sacrifice was to become one of the most consistent themes of his presidency and 1980 reelection campaign. Early in his presidency, Carter was embracing a position on national sacrifice that would be difficult to abandon in his reelection campaign without, in effect, admitting failure and conceding that Reagan might have a good point.

By March 1980, inflation had reached 14.68 percent, its highest point so far that year. The main sources for the rise in inflation, according to Carter, were energy prices, the declining growth in productivity, and “failure in government and as individuals, as an entire American society, to live within our means.” The New York Times ran a front-page story on the speech under the headline “Carter to Trim Budget $13 Billion and Curb Credit to Cut Inflation.” The deck read: “Sees Need for Pain and Discipline.”

Reagan, on the other hand, neither blamed the American people nor advocated policies prescribing pain and discipline. He opposed the use of wage and price controls as an antidote to inflation, instead singling out government spending and interventionist polices as the underlying causes of the problem.
Herein lay Carter and Reagan’s key difference on the economy. Reagan had two advantages: first, he did not bear any responsibility for the last four years of increasing inflation; and second, he had long been identified with anti-inflationary ideas. Carter was losing the inflation battle not only in real terms, but in campaign terms as well. His economic speeches and plans appeared to be reactions to economic shocks rather than innovative measures that could broaden his coalition.

Even so, Carter slowly moved in Reagan’s direction on economic issues. “The Carter administration shifted gradually away from neo-Keynesianism to monetarist and supply-side thinking,” Bruce Schulman has suggested, “from an emphasis on growth and unemployment to an all-out attack on inflation, from short-term fiscal management to long-term structural change.” This shift, however, failed to increase public confidence in Carter’s ability to manage the economy.

In preparing policy priorities for 1978, Bob Ginsburg, a Carter administration staffer, remarked, “I do not think the President sees himself as, or will want to run for reelection as, a ‘man of the economy.’ . . . [W]e would not want to face an up or down vote from the public on the crucial issues of inflation, unemployment, and the budget deficit.” One could dismiss this statement as the musings of a lone official, but it is consistent with Carter strategist Pat Caddell’s plan to emphasize the Rose Garden effect over specific policy positions.

Carter also moved to embrace a number of other positions traditionally identified with Reagan. In January 1979, for example, he touted “reduc[ing] the growth of Federal spending” as a central component in his anti-inflation package. Sounding very much like Reagan, he went on, “I believe that we must firmly limit what the Government taxes and spends. . . . The Government has no resources of its own—its only resources are those it collects from the taxpayer.” This was not a unique position, nor was it an idea that had been at the forefront of Carter’s economic thinking during his presidency. At a rhetorical level, the incumbent was finding it difficult to articulate distinct alternatives to Reagan’s domestic and economic policy proposals.

It was his call for sacrifice that most fully distinguished Carter from his closest competitor. While Reagan promised a better economy without undue pain and sacrifice, the Carter team emphasized trade-offs. As his press secretary, Jody Powell, remarked, “The trade-offs [on battling inflation and the energy shortage] all along the line are extremely difficult. Everything you do in one area costs you something in another
Reality was taking its toll. In the summer of 1979, Carter asked Congress to grant him the authority to ration gasoline. Odd-even day gas sales went into effect on June 20 in some states.

Carter was scheduled to give a major address on the energy crisis on July 5, but he postponed it in favor of a series of meetings at Camp David with “people from almost every segment of our society.” The president emerged from the sessions with a somber assessment, which he delivered in a speech on July 15:

> It’s clear that the true problems of our Nation are much deeper—deeper than gasoline lines or energy shortages, deeper even than inflation or recession. . . . I want to talk to you right now about a fundamental threat to American democracy. . . . It is a crisis of confidence. . . . The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric of America. . . . Energy will be the immediate test of our ability to unite this Nation, and it can also be the standard around which we rally. On the battlefield of energy we can win for our Nation a new confidence, and we can seize control again of our common destiny. . . . I do not promise a quick way out of our Nation’s problems, when the truth is that the only way out is an all-out effort. . . . We can manage the short-term shortages more effectively and we will, but there are no short-term solutions to our long-range problems. There is simply no way to avoid sacrifice.

In his speech, Carter emphasized increased domestic energy production and reduced government interference. These suggestions moved the president closer to the positions of his Republican challengers, but Carter still rejected their call to decontrol oil and gas prices.

Reagan, on the other hand, was promising the American people greater prosperity and peace. The major distinctions between their respective positions came down to Reagan’s unswerving opposition to wage and price controls of any kind, and his commitment to relaxing federal environmental restrictions on energy exploration. For Carter, to embrace these policies would be to risk losing the support of his base.

On July 16, Reagan issued a response to Carter’s speech, which he said was based on “massive new taxes . . . and on massive new government programs.” He accused the administration of an inability to allocate gasoline supplies “fairly and rationally” and blamed the president for the energy crisis.
Carter’s speech failed to generate higher performance ratings in national polls. In fact, in its coverage of the speech, the *Washington Post* proclaimed that President Carter had succeeded in making “malaise a household word.”

“Carter’s economic program attempted to walk a fine line between the demands of various Democratic constituencies and his own ideas on what was fiscally prudent,” political scientist Henry Plotkin observed. “In all, as far as the economy was concerned, Carter was trapped by a need to limit spending while reconciling the values of traditional welfare-state Democrats.” Reagan, on the other hand, offered something approaching utopia for the American people: lower taxes accompanied by a balanced budget, a reduction (or at least deceleration) in government spending, and lower inflation.

Carter was also backed up against the wall on foreign and defense policy. The one-term Georgia governor had received his major education in international relations through his association with the Trilateral Commission. Formed in 1973 by leaders and private citizens from Europe, Japan, Canada, and the United States, the Commission sought “to foster closer cooperation among these core democratic industrialized areas of the world with shared leadership responsibilities in the wider international system.”

Carter was profoundly influenced by the trilateralists’ dedication to enhance cooperation among industrialized democracies. He was particularly impressed with liberal-theory notions of bringing the nonmilitary dimensions of American power to bear in international crises. Through the Commission, he became friends with and was tutored by Zbigniew Brzezinski, the Columbia University political scientist who would later become his campaign adviser and national security adviser.

Carter’s foreign policy plan during the 1976 presidential race had been based on greater attention to North-South issues, human rights, and morality in foreign policy; deepening ties among North Atlantic countries; continuing America’s commitment to Japan while simultaneously preparing to withdraw U.S. troops from South Korea; normalizing relations with the People’s Republic of China; and encouraging and supporting negotiations between the Arab states and Israel. Carter’s pledges also included halting production of the B-1 bomber and other weapons programs, reducing arms sales, making deep cuts in defense spending, and concluding the SALT II treaty with the Soviet Union. This latter position was one expression of his unswerving commitment to nuclear arms control negotiations and antiproliferation measures.
In his first foreign policy speech as president, delivered on May 22, 1977, at the University of Notre Dame, Carter discussed the philosophy that would guide him. He declared that U.S. foreign policy should project “our essential character as a nation” and should be “based on fundamental values.” He also said Americans “are now free of that inordinate fear of communism.”

But there were at least two factions within the Carter White House when it came to foreign policy. The so-called regionalists, such as Secretary of State Cyrus Vance and Ambassador to the United Nations Andrew Young believed in dealing with international problems at the subsystem level, and giving greater weight to the nonmilitary dimensions of American power. Globalists such as Brzezinski favored a grand strategy that both viewed the international system through the prism of great power politics and gave greater recognition to the military dimensions of American power. Vance and Brzezinski, representing these positions, deeply disagreed over how much and what kind of foreign policy priority should be given to the Soviet Union. For Vance, détente required a de-emphasis on military competition and a focus on nuclear arms control. Brzezinski, meanwhile, advocated a more robust American military presence and a greater recognition that the U.S.-Soviet relationship was marked by both cooperation and conflict. Carter, who vacillated between these perspectives, was often accused of inconsistence and incoherence in his foreign policy.

The Panama Canal negotiations provided the president with what Carter biographer Peter Bourne has called “a prime opportunity to apply moral values to foreign policy.” On September 7, 1977, Carter and Panamanian general Omar Torrijos signed a treaty to transfer the canal to Panama at the end of the twentieth century and a second treaty ensuring the canal’s continued neutrality. The U.S. Senate narrowly approved both treaties in the spring of 1978 and drained the president’s political capital.

Meanwhile, Ronald Reagan had quickly distinguished himself as an outspoken critic of the treaties, a position that factored significantly in his late-1970s rise to prominence. Reagan was so closely identified with opposition to the negotiations that during his fourth month in the White House, Carter sent Ambassador Sol Linowitz, one of the U.S. negotiators on the canal treaties, to brief him on the issue. Peter Hannaford, one of Reagan’s aides, attended the briefing at Washington’s Madison Hotel with the governor and his wife, Nancy. Hannaford recalls that he and Reagan agreed that “it was something of a compliment for the Carter administration to assume that Ronald Reagan
might have it in his power to mount so strong a campaign against a new treaty as a private citizen that he could derail its course.”

On May 1, Reagan discussed his opposition to the Panama Canal treaties on NBC’s Meet the Press: “I do not believe that we should be . . . negotiating to give away the Canal or to give up our sovereign rights, and our rights of defense of the Canal, and I shall oppose that.” A June 10, 1977, newspaper headline reflected the situation: “Carter policies draw active Reagan criticism.” The San Diego Evening Tribune headline accompanied an article that discussed the implications for U.S. domestic politics of Reagan’s relentless commentary on the canal treaties: “It was Reagan . . . who first made Panama Canal treaty negotiations a campaign issue [in 1976].” On August 11, Reagan’s Los Angeles office released a two-page statement summarizing his opposition. The statement described Reagan as believing that the existing treaties established U.S. sovereignty over the Canal Zone and thus should not be abrogated; that Fidel Castro sought to spread Marxism throughout the region through his friendship with the leader of Panama; and that the Soviet Union would enter the power vacuum left by the withdrawal of U.S. armed forces from the Canal Zone. On September 8, Reagan testified against the treaties before the Senate Judiciary Committee’s Separation of Powers Subcommittee. He reiterated these views in his October 4 newspaper column, in a speech in Houston that October, and again repeatedly throughout 1978 and 1979. Reagan regularly spoke against the treaties in his radio program. He did not succeed in derailing the negotiations, of course, but his estimable counteroffensive would pay a political dividend later on. He had associated himself with the Panama Canal treaties as closely as the president had—albeit from a very different angle.

Carter was as devoted to the SALT II treaty as he was to the Panama negotiations. Despite the fact that the nuclear arms talks had been languishing since the early 1970s, he was determined to conclude the nuclear arms control agreement with the Soviets. In remarks to a meeting of the Special Coordinating Committee at the White House on March 2, 1978, Cyrus Vance spoke about the arms control negotiations in a manner that illustrated the president’s position: “I think the key still remains SALT. If we make progress on SALT, then a lot of things will fall into place that do not fall into place otherwise.” Brzezinski, too, wanted a second arms limitation treaty with the Soviets, but he did not prioritize nuclear arms control over increased Soviet activities around the world, including military buildups in Angola and Ethiopia.
The SALT II talks were held early in Carter’s presidency, but it was not until June 18, 1979, that he and Soviet general secretary Leonid Brezhnev signed the treaty. Four days later, the president submitted the agreement to the U.S. Senate for consent deliberations. Extensive hearings by the Senate Armed Services Committee, the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, and the Senate Intelligence Committee were accompanied by growing doubts about SALT II’s chances of success. International events in the summer—principally the “discovery” of a Soviet combat brigade in Cuba—fueled concerns in the Senate, and among treaty skeptics more generally, about America’s ability to confidentially verify Soviet compliance with the terms of SALT II. It was becoming increasingly apparent that Carter lacked the two-thirds majority needed for Senate ratification.

The president pressed hard. Anticipating a battle, he declared on April 25, 1979, that if the Senate did not approve the treaty, “We would no longer be identified as a peace loving nation.” At a White House meeting on May 10, 1979, he said: “I think the most important single achievement that could possibly take place for our Nation during my lifetime is the ratification of the SALT treaty.” And he once again warned that the United States “would be looked upon as a warmonger, not a peace loving nation by many other people of the world” if the Senate did not vote to ratify.65

The differences between Reagan and Carter on foreign policy could hardly have been sharper. While Reagan was charging the Soviets with violating the expectations of reciprocity on which détente was founded, Carter was accusing American legislators of fostering aggression. As for the economy, Carter repeatedly assigned the American people at least partial responsibility for their own energy and economic woes, while Reagan saw the government, not the American people, as the cause of these problems. Carter’s somber message of responsibility and sacrifice was a stark contrast to Reagan’s optimistic, can-do message.

Even Carter’s Democratic base was now beginning to defect to the Reagan camp. In his speech at an awards dinner of the Coalition for a Democratic Majority (CDM), an organization of conservative Democrats committed to a more militarily assertive U.S. foreign policy, CDM founder and senator Henry Jackson of Washington unequivocally opposed Senate ratification of SALT II: “To enter into a treaty which favors the Soviets, as this one does, on the ground that we will be in a worse position without it, is appeasement in its purest form.” Jackson lamented the imbalance of U.S.-Soviet relations under Carter:
“All of this [the Soviet military buildup] is taking place in a misty atmosphere of amiability and good fellowship under a policy of détente.” Jackson’s June 12, 1979, speech attracted national media attention and heaped more pressure on the Carter administration from conservative Democrats.66

The administration vigorously sought to prove that its Soviet policy was being carried forward on a truly reciprocal basis, but members of the CDM remained skeptical. Conservative Democratic elites had been unhappy with Carter for a long time, but by 1980 their dissatisfaction was reaching a new level. In January, Carter met with CDM leaders at the White House. Their differences were made especially apparent when CDM representative Norman Podhoretz expressed interest in a campaign for human rights in the Soviet Union. Carter responded by saying that he needed help on Uruguay. According to Elliott Abrams, who was in attendance in his capacity as a Jackson aide, “[T]he meeting was a disaster, the straw that breaks the camel’s back. Carter told us that he will continue to pursue a leftist McGovernite–Andy Young foreign policy.” Upon leaving, Midge Decter, another conservative Democrat in attendance, asked Jeane Kirkpatrick what she thought about the session with the president. Kirkpatrick responded, “I am not going to support that man.”67 The movement of conservative Democrats away from Carter was becoming a stampede.

A similar redirection of loyalties had begun among the military after members of the top brass openly opposed the president’s March 1977 decision to withdraw American troops from South Korea and his June 1977 decision to slow down the production of the B-1 bomber. The military leadership was also displeased with the fiscal year 1979 defense budget (put forward on January 23, 1978), which requested a far smaller increase in defense spending than the Ford administration had projected. There were also unpopular cuts to the navy’s shipbuilding program and concerns about the April 1978 decision to defer production of the neutron bomb. In an unusual move, the Joint Chiefs of Staff broke ranks with the president and Secretary of Defense Harold Brown on May 29, 1980, by testifying to Congress that military spending should be much higher than the figure the White House had proposed.68

Carter did eventually seek larger increases in defense spending and invoked a tougher line with the Soviets, but he did so reactively, a strategy that hurt him politically. The years 1979 and 1980 were exceptionally eventful ones on the international stage: the Sandinistas seized power in Nicaragua on July 17, 1979; Iranian students took a group of
American hostages at the U.S. embassy in Tehran on November 4, 1979; the Soviets invaded Afghanistan in December 1979; Carter’s efforts to rescue the American hostages in Iran failed catastrophically in April 1980; and the administration suspended economic and military aid to El Salvador after four American Catholic nuns were murdered by a Salvadoran death squad in December 1980.

These and other events transformed Carter’s political rhetoric. Shortly after the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, he was no longer stating that Americans were free of “that inordinate fear of communism,” and instead he was declaring that “this action of the Soviets has made a more dramatic change in my own opinion of what the Soviets’ ultimate goals are than anything they’ve done in the previous time I’ve been in office.” On January 4 and January 23 (during his State of the Union address), among other times, Carter made stern warnings to the Soviets and instituted a package of sanctions, including a partial grain embargo against the Soviet Union; recalling the U.S. ambassador in Moscow; a boycott of the Moscow Olympics; a request that the Senate halt its deliberations on SALT II; and additional development of the Rapid Deployment Force, a quick-reaction team that would be able to respond to Persian Gulf crises. This package of foreign and defense policies did not, however, constitute a fundamental shift in Carter’s political orientation. He and Vance, in particular, remained deeply and vocally committed to Senate ratification of SALT II and what remained of superpower détente.

For Carter, a complete change of course would have been a not-so-tacit admission of the failure of his decisions and policies during his first three years in office. In equivocating in his support of the shah of Iran, he had sacrificed a pillar of American foreign policy in the Middle East and a key post for monitoring Soviet ballistic missile activity along Iran’s 2,000-mile border with the USSR. By refusing to endorse multilateral mediation efforts in Nicaragua, Carter had opened the door to the Sandinista seizure of power and the advent of another Marxist-oriented government in the Western hemisphere.

As the presidential contest was getting under way in 1979 and 1980, Carter was stuck in the awkward position of having to adjust his policies to new international realities while simultaneously defending his prior positions. At the same time, he also had to contrast himself to his chief Republican opponent. His campaign chose to go with a two-pronged strategy, defending Carter’s record while portraying Reagan as a warmonger. But both claims rang hollow. Although he adopted a
more aggressive military stance during his final year in office, Carter never made the leap to a major reorientation of U.S. foreign policy, something even critics in his own party were demanding.

One might be inclined to assume that Carter’s political demise spelled success for Reagan. But it was not that simple. As Jay Winik has written of Carter’s 1980 meeting with the CDM representatives, “[I]t was not clear, standing there on that chill January morning, that anyone in the CDM was included in Ronald Reagan’s vision of America.” The political bloodletting in the Democratic Party offered Reagan an unheralded opportunity, but he would still have to work hard to win the support of discontented Democrats. In dozens of radio commentaries on the SALT II treaty and defense policy, Reagan constantly made reference to the defections among the military brass and the conservative Democratic factions. Instead of taking the lead, as he had done on the Panama Canal issue, Reagan now fell back on long citations from the congressional record and the speeches of military officials and defense experts to argue against SALT II. He openly courted members of both the CDM and the Committee on the Present Danger (CPD), a bipartisan group dedicated to ensuring continued American military superiority. The CPD claimed a roster of prominent members, including Reagan, who joined the organization’s executive committee in 1979; George Shultz, president of Bechtel Corporation and future Reagan secretary of state; and Eugene Rostow, former dean of Yale’s law school, LBJ’s undersecretary of state, and director of the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency during the Reagan administration. As he wooed conservative Democrats, Reagan devoted six radio commentaries to a speech by Rostow. And behind all this politicking was a clear message: massive increases in military spending would force the Soviets to cease their adventurism and make the world a safer place.

Other Republican challengers made similar appeals, but none had been doing so with the laser-beam focus that Reagan had demonstrated during the late 1970s. He pounded away at his message relentlessly through his daily radio commentaries, his biweekly columns, and his innumerable speeches on behalf of his Citizens for the Republic PAC. Reagan was everywhere, gaining dominance through his emphasis on international peace through strong defense.

Carter’s shift toward a more hawkish defense and foreign policy was a net political gain for Reagan. As political scientist Seyom Brown has observed, “The Carter administration’s new rhetorical and policy
preoccupation with the Soviet threat appeared to legitimize the complaints of the unreconstructed cold warriors in the Reagan camp.” Carter’s shift in effect validated the critique of détente that Reagan had so publicly expounded in his speeches and writings for nearly four years. Carter was moving toward a position that Reagan had already staked out, and the president’s shift failed to improve the state of his relations with conservative Democratic elites and opinion makers.

Nor did the president’s shift on defense help him among party faithful on the left. Early in his presidency there was vocal concern about his initial increase in defense spending. In December 1977, the month before Carter sent his FY 1979 budget to Congress, liberal Democrats began criticizing his defense proposals. Ron Brown, the vice president of the National Urban League, expressed concern that Carter was not sufficiently decreasing defense spending. Brown declared, “No longer can we have both guns and butter.” Lee Alexander, the mayor of Syracuse and president of the U.S. Conference of Mayors, said that an increase in defense spending “indicated devastating consequences for urban America.” Following the president’s official presentation of the defense budget, House Speaker Thomas P. O’Neill, Jr., said that funding for jobs might be compromised by defense spending.

The president was cornered. His defense spending increases were seen by conservative Democrats as pale imitations of Reagan’s proposals, and by the liberals as expensive distractions from social policy. Carter was being pulled to the right by the Scoop Jackson Democrats and Ronald Reagan, and pulled to the left by the Kennedy Democrats. Unable to hold the middle, his campaign began to come apart.

The president’s electoral troubles were not lost on his advisers. Prior to the primaries, for instance, Jerry Rafshoon, the media director for the reelection campaign, wrote a memo to the president in which he suggested that the president “should be careful never to cede your command of the political center to anyone” and noted a list of themes such as peace, prosperity, and trust that might be invoked throughout the campaign. At the same time, he delicately reported, “There is a general sense that, while you have been trying to do many good things, you have failed to provide the country with this ‘vision.’ That is why Brown, Connally, Reagan and Kennedy (in ascending order) are such threats. They each, for different reasons, suggest vaguely that they could fill the ‘leadership gap.’ . . . There is a widespread sense that you have let the country down on this score.”

Rafshoon was not alone. In a July 7, 1978, memo to the president,
Jody Powell, his press secretary, was blunt about the situation: “Our greatest vulnerability is the perception that we cannot govern.” In a September 28, 1979, memo to Hamilton Jordan, Dick Moe, Mondale’s campaign director, argued for developing campaign themes in advance of the primaries and suggested abandoning the current course, which he defined as a weak rhetorical strategy: “Instead of responding to vague charges about leadership with equally airy counter-charges, we can do a better job of showing the country the specific ways in which we are leading. Instead of dwelling on how difficult our plight is—how tough the nation’s problems, how strapped the resources, how atomized the Congress and country—we can be mobilizing the enormous American desire to contribute and get the job done.” As the primaries approached, the Carter team knew it lacked a vision and a set of appeals to make to voters. They would continue to struggle with these issues throughout 1980.

The Republican Debates and Primaries and a Comment on the Carter-Kennedy Competition:
January 6 to June 3, 1980

A large number of Republican candidates competed in the primaries. The lineup included Connally, Crane, and Reagan on the right, and Anderson, Baker, Bush, and Dole occupying various moderate-to-liberal positions, with Anderson decidedly more liberal than the rest. Conservatives were concerned that an intense rivalry between Crane and Reagan for control of the right wing of the Republican Party could open the door to a Bush victory. Following the recommendation of John Sears, his campaign chairman, Reagan declined to participate in the Iowa primary forum on January 6. Sears’s position was that Reagan’s abstention would cast him as the front-runner, above the fray. But it did not turn out that way. Anderson impressed politicians and journalists as the candidate with the “strongest, freshest impression,” while Reagan was accused of underestimating the importance of the Iowa forum. Throughout the debate, the challengers criticized Reagan’s refusal to participate. Stephen Roberts, the state Republican chairman, remarked that “the biggest loser was Reagan, especially because we thought the debate worked, that it didn’t turn out to be a farce that wasn’t worth the effort.”
In the midst of the debate, Anderson made what was interpreted to be a thinly veiled reference to Reagan’s economic proposals, “How do you balance the budget, cut taxes and increase defense spending at the same time?” he asked. “It’s very simple. You do it with mirrors. And that’s what it would take.” Reagan’s core economic message was being attacked, and he was not present to defend himself. Two weeks later, Reagan lost the Iowa caucus to Bush, 30 percent to 32 percent.

The Reagan campaign quickly regrouped. On February 15, Reagan met with his chief foreign policy adviser, Richard Allen; adviser (and future attorney general) Edwin Meese; and pollster Dick Wirthlin in Massachusetts to discuss the direction of the campaign. William Casey, a Wall Street lawyer, former Securities and Exchange Commission chairman, and the group’s choice to replace Sears (as well as being Reagan’s future CIA director), was invited to join them. In the days surrounding the meeting, it was decided that Sears would be fired. The announcement would be held off until February 26, the day of the New Hampshire primary, so that the news would not interfere with the important campaigning in the days before the vote.

In the debate among Republican contenders in Manchester, New Hampshire, on February 20, Reagan repeated the heresthetical message that economic growth and increased defense spending could be accompanied by a reduction in taxes, inflation, and the growth of government spending:

I would in my first day as President put a freeze on the hiring of Federal employees. I would then start seeking a tax reduction in the income tax rates across the board over a three-year period, and reduce them by at least 30 percent in an effort to create jobs.

... I would in addition to that, take the punitive taxes and regulations and remove them from the back of industry so that we could become more productive, and thus we wouldn’t have to grind out that printing press imitation money that’s destroying the value of our savings, our insurance and our pensions.

According to Wirthlin: “The Manchester debate was the key event that turned the election from George Bush to Ronald Reagan. . . . [A]most 40 percent of those who voted said that they saw the debate. . . . Thirty-three percent said that Ronald Reagan won the debate, 17 percent Bush, 14 percent John Anderson, and 12 percent Baker.”
On Saturday, February 23, another debate was held in New Hampshire, yet another 20 miles farther south, in Nashua. Under the initial terms agreed to by Bush, Reagan, and the sponsoring Nashua Telegraph, this third debate would be limited to the two front-runners. Dole protested to the Federal Elections Commission on the grounds that the newspaper was illegally contributing to the Bush and Reagan campaigns by paying for the debate. The commission accepted this argument. In response, Reagan proposed that he and Bush pay for the forum themselves. When Bush rejected this proposal, Reagan offered to cover the fee himself and did so. He then invited the candidates snubbed by the Telegraph to join him. Anderson, Baker, Crane, and Dole accepted. They stood behind Reagan, who took a seat. Bush was already in his chair. There was a commotion in the audience as Reagan sought to explain what had occurred, and the Telegraph’s editor demanded, “Turn Mr. Reagan’s microphone off.” Reagan responded, “I am paying for this microphone, Mr. Green.” Reagan recalled the incident in his memoir: “For some reason my words hit the audience, whose emotions were already worked up, like a sledgehammer. The crowd roared and just went wild.” Anderson, Baker, Crane, and Dole, the candidates who had been snubbed then left the stage, and the debate between Bush and Reagan began.

In Riker’s theory, rhetoric alone is often sufficient to persuade voters, and in this instance Reagan, a master rhetorician, scored a huge rhetorical point with his audience. As Reagan himself later reminisced, “I may have won the debate, the primary—and the nomination—right there. After the debate, our people told me the gymnasium parking lot was littered with Bush-for-President badges.”

Something else happened that night that Reagan did not discuss in his memoirs. During the two-man Reagan-Bush debate, Reagan was able to articulate what the New York Times reported to be the “most persistent difference” between the two men. When Bush argued that Reagan’s 30 percent tax cut, to be dispersed over three years, would increase the federal deficit and inflation, Reagan stood his ground, asserting that under his plan everything could be achieved—fewer taxes, slower deficit growth, and lower inflation. It was another step toward binding together a coalition of social and economic conservatives.

The New Hampshire debates enabled Reagan to reclaim his front-runner status, and he won the state’s primary with nearly 50 percent of the vote. Bush received 23 percent, Baker 12 percent, Anderson approximately 10 percent, Crane 1.8 percent, and Connally 1.5 percent. Sears,
whom the Reagan camp held responsible for their loss in Iowa, was fired according to plan and replaced by William Casey.

Baker, Bush, Connally, and Reagan participated in the next debate, held on February 28 in Columbia, South Carolina. (Dole had suspended his campaign after his poor performance in New Hampshire.) Accusations flew back and forth, but the underlying tone was basically congenial. Connally accused Bush of being a liberal and told Reagan he was not prepared to be president. Baker was still reeling after his exclusion from the Nashua debate. The verbal posturing of the South Carolina forum did little to expose substantive policy differences among the candidates. The headline in Charleston’s News and Courier read: “GOP Candidates Find Few Major Differences.”

Perhaps the most significant consequence of the debate came in the second rank of the field. As the Washington Post reported, “This debate probably helped Reagan consolidate the favorite’s position he holds in the March 8 South Carolina Republican primary and the March 11 contests in Alabama, Florida and Georgia, by pitting Connally against Bush on a variety of issues.”

Reagan came in third behind Bush and Anderson in the March 4 Massachusetts primary but prevailed in Vermont that same day. On March 5, Baker said, “I don’t like to do it, but it’s clear that my campaign is not going anywhere,” and withdrew from the race. Reagan went on to an easy victory in South Carolina on March 8, taking 54.7 percent of the vote to Bush’s 14.8. On March 11, Reagan defeated Bush throughout the South: in Alabama, he took 69.7 percent to Bush’s 25.9 percent; in Florida, 56.2 percent to Bush’s 30.2; and in Georgia, a sweeping 73.2 percent to Bush’s 12.6.

Two days later, Anderson, Bush, Crane, and Reagan reconvened for a debate in Chicago. Party unity broke down as the group ganged up on Anderson, who was on his home turf. The three contenders derided Anderson’s proposal for a 50-cent gas tax that would reduce Social Security taxes. Crane (who was also from Illinois) told Anderson, “You are in the wrong party.” And Reagan (who had his own Illinois roots) warned that “when you raise one tax to cut another, the government always seems to come out ahead.” As the New York Times reported, Reagan also used the opportunity to reiterate his heresthetical message: “Mr. Reagan . . . [gave] a forceful exposition of his view that a [tax] cut now would actually increase Government revenues and lead to a balanced budget.” Anderson answered that a tax cut would “make inflation even more virulent.” When the discussion turned to Iran, Rea-
gan said that the Carter administration should have helped the shah stay in power because his regime was “progressive” on issues such as education and land reform. Reagan won the March 18 contest in Illinois with 48.4 percent of the vote. Anderson took second with 36.7 percent, and Bush trailed a distant third with 11 percent.

Although Anderson took the lion’s share—50 percent—of the ballots cast by Democrats who voted Republican in the Illinois primary, Reagan received an impressive 28 percent of the crossover votes. The Reagan Democrats were almost entirely social conservatives, people whom Reagan had worked to include in his new coalition. A writer for the New York Times reported that many of the crossovers “oppose greater welfare spending, and combine that with strong opposition to abortion. . . . Yet, Reagan supporters also say that they favor larger military budgets and a stronger American posture around the world.”

In the midst of this Republican sparring, Ford ended public speculation by announcing that he would sit out the race for the sake of party unity. Ford’s decision gave the Reagan campaign team the opportunity to underscore its candidate’s position as the Republican front-runner.

Anderson’s plans were also the focus of much speculation. On March 19, John C. White, the chair of the Democratic National Committee, told reporters that if Anderson became an independent, he would take votes from Carter and Reagan.

Bush’s candidacy temporarily regained momentum on March 25 when he defeated Reagan in Connecticut by a vote of 38.6 percent to 33.9 percent. Reagan, however, was racking up endorsements. Crane, who had withdrawn from the contest just a few weeks before the Connecticut primary, asked his supporters to back the Californian. Connally declared Reagan the “champ” soon thereafter. Reagan strengthened his lead in early April with victories in Kansas, Wisconsin, and Louisiana. Bush, however, again fought back, winning the April 22 Pennsylvania primary with 50.5 percent of the vote to Reagan’s 42.5 percent.

The next day, the two contenders met in Houston for a Republican forum hosted by the League of Women Voters. Throughout the primaries, Reagan had proposed a response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that included a naval blockade of Cuba, an idea with which Bush disagreed. His sharpest criticism, however, was directed at Reagan’s plan to cut taxes by 10 percent annually for three years. Bush predicted that such a plan would add to the deficit and increase inflation, accusing Reagan of “overpromising” and countering with his
own, more modest $20 billion cut. Reagan retorted by repeating his heresthetic mantra that the Kemp-Roth proposal would “not reduce Federal income, it will only reduce the increase in taxes.”

Anderson had declined to participate in the Houston debate, and one day later announced his decision to run on an independent ticket. He was more of a dark horse now than ever. Despite the fact that he had not won a single primary, and that a November 1979 Harris Poll had found that just 1 percent of the American people had even heard of him, the Illinois congressman was now embarking on a second full-scale campaign.

As Kennedy challenged Carter for the Democratic nomination, the incumbent was facing the intractable crisis in Iran. On April 7, Carter broke diplomatic relations with the new Iranian regime and banned exports to the country. At a news conference 10 days later, he declared that “some sort of military action” would be necessary if sanctions did not end the hostage crisis. On April 24, he sent a rescue team to free the hostages; but mechanical problems aggravated by an unanticipated sandstorm forced them to abort, and in the ensuing melee two choppers collided, resulting in the death of eight military. The dead were abandoned in their burning helicopter as the survivors retreated. Secretary of State Cyrus Vance resigned in protest over the mission. One day later, Senator Edmund Muskie was named to replace him.

The candidates had until then largely refrained from openly criticizing administration policies on the grounds that private diplomatic efforts to free the hostages could be hurt by their campaign statements. As time went on, however, and the hostages remained in captivity, that criticism began to mount. After the imposition of sanctions, Reagan publicly declared, “It’s just more of the same and it’s been wrong from the first.” In the months to come, his critiques of Carter’s Iran policy would become more pointed, and he would begin to incorporate them into his more general strategy of negative campaigning. Reagan’s tactic was to continually urge voters to question the president’s competence on all major policy issues.

Meanwhile, Reagan and Bush continued to trade electoral punches. On May 3, Reagan won the Texas primary with 51 percent of the vote to Bush’s 47.4. Three days later, Bush won the District of Columbia election with 66.1 percent of the vote, while Reagan barely scored in that electoral unit. Reagan, however, was the big winner elsewhere that day, defeating Bush, Anderson, and the rest of the field in Indiana, North Carolina, Tennessee, and South Carolina.
As Reagan accumulated victories, Bush continued to focus his attack on Reagan’s tax-cut plan. During a May 11 campaign stop in Michigan, Bush told his audience that Reagan’s plan “may sound like a blueprint for paradise, but in my opinion it is a blueprint for economic chaos.” The quote became part of the next day’s *New York Times* headline: “Bush Says Reagan’s Plan Would Be ‘Economic Chaos.’”

But Bush’s challenge was not attracting voters to his base. On May 13, Reagan scored clear victories in Maryland and Nebraska. He also won the Oregon primary seven days later, but ceded Michigan to Bush, who carried 57.5 percent of the vote to Reagan’s 31.8. The Oregon and Michigan primaries left Reagan with approximately 992 delegate votes—just six short of what he needed to win his party’s nomination. Acknowledging Reagan’s momentum, on May 26 Bush asked his supporters to back Reagan and effectively ceased active campaigning. He did not make his withdrawal official, however, because he was still hoping to receive federal funds to pay down his campaign debt.

Needless to say, Reagan won all of the remaining primaries on May 27 and June 3, sending him into the Republican convention as the GOP’s presumptive nominee.

Bush’s campaign statements suggest that he understood Reagan’s heresthetic advantage: the governor had fastened onto a set of economic arguments that any opponent would need to undermine if he were to undo the growing Reagan coalition. In response, Bush relied on criticism of Reagan’s economic plan, which he memorably labeled “voodoo economics.” Yet George Bush failed to grasp that his rhetorical strategy, appealing as it was to his moderate Republican base, was unlikely to attract Republicans from the right or socially conservative Democrats in the center. Whereas Reagan not only shared socially conservative Democrats’ views on abortion and school prayer but was also able to assure them that GOP economic policies wouldn’t hurt them, Bush had nothing compelling to offer conservatives of either party. Rather than presenting an alternative plan or counterargument to Reagan’s heresthetic, Bush relied primarily on a negative campaign strategy of criticizing Reagan’s economic logic.

Nor did Bush offer voters a clear alternative foreign policy. In advocating indirect American aid for the anti-Soviet Afghan rebels in January 1980, the Texan was voicing the same idea that Reagan had been endorsing. Reagan advocated that “we ought to be funneling weapons through [Pakistan] that can be delivered to those freedom fighters in Afghanistan to fight for their own freedom. . . . I think there’s
nothing wrong with giving weapons to a free people to defend their freedom.” Several days later, Reagan proposed renewing arms sales to Pakistan “with full knowledge that some of the weapons will find their way across the border to the freedom fighters in Afghanistan.”

Bush’s main criticism of Reagan’s foreign policy amounted to a negative attack: “I’ve had experience in foreign policy, and he hasn’t,” he mocked. But Reagan was working to persuade voters of the comprehensiveness of his agenda, which included both a robust foreign policy based on peace through increased defense spending and an economic program that promised those defense expenditures would neither stimulate inflation nor reduce social spending.

Reagan’s other challengers ran into difficulties similar to Bush’s. Crane, for example, had adopted a peace-through-strength message that echoed Reagan’s attack on Ford four years earlier. Crane’s statement in New Hampshire on February 20 could have been Reagan’s in 1976: “I think we should keep in mind that George Washington gave us the soundest counsel and it’s been counsel handed down since the ancient Greeks: that those who desire peace should prepare for war.” The problem was that Reagan did Reagan better than anyone ever could. Consistent with the dominance principle, Reagan had already established his ownership of the peace-through-strength idea. The other challengers could endorse the principle and respect the rhetoric associated with it, but through sheer effort—his seizure of the conservative mantle after Nixon’s victories in 1968 and 1972; his tireless radio addresses, newspaper columns, and speeches throughout the late 1970s; and his full-scale challenge to Ford in 1976—Reagan had irrevocably identified himself with “peace through strength.”

By 1980, Reagan had also refined his message of social conservatism. Thus, Crane’s support for a school prayer bill endorsed by influential evangelicals including Jim Bakker, Jerry Falwell, James Robinson, and Pat Robertson was equally matched by Reagan’s bid for the religious Right. While campaigning in California, Reagan reassured his born-again supporters: “[T]here are people who want to take the ‘In God We Trust’ off our money. I don’t know of a time when we needed it more. . . . This nation is hungry for a spiritual revival.” The audience’s enthusiasm left no doubt: Reagan was in rhetorical command of the religious Right.

Candidates such as Crane and Connally could not mount effective challenges to Reagan from the right, and Bush was unable to build on his natural support from the middle. All three, as well as the various
lesser candidates, were running rhetorical campaigns. Yet even in this dimension Reagan proved the superior actor. His talents as a public speaker enabled him to turn the weapon of rhetoric against those who had no other device on which to rely. His rhetorical skills also effectively defended his heresthetical grand plan from criticism. No other Republican contender was better able to convince voters that he could deliver wealth and security for all.

Anderson was gaining some strength among liberal Republicans and Democrats, but it was not clear that this support amounted to a net loss for Reagan. The governor’s heresthetical message was directed at a wing of the Democratic Party different from the one that found Anderson appealing.

Kennedy, on the other hand, posed a substantial challenge to Carter during the primaries. Although he only won 10 primaries to Carter’s 24, by staying in the race until the Democratic convention in mid-August, he pushed Carter steadily to the left at the very time that the president was being pulled to the right by Reagan’s challenge to the conservative center.

The Massachusetts senator’s presidential campaign was clearly a liberal challenge to Carter’s policies. His response to the energy crisis included rationing gas at the level of 11 gallons per week for each licensed driver for three years, after which the quantity would be increased to 14 gallons per week. He opposed lifting oil price controls and wanted to phase out the use of nuclear power plants. On the latter issue, Carter supported some development of nuclear energy.107

Sharp criticism of Carter’s performance on the economy, foreign policy, and defense was another focus of Kennedy’s campaign. He called the president’s proposal to combat inflation “too little, too late, and too unfair,” and he blamed the Carter administration for the Iranian hostage crisis. The senator also called for a tougher stand on the Soviet Union in the wake of its invasion of Afghanistan.108 These negative rhetorical attacks did not constitute an alternative or comprehensive plan on domestic or foreign policy.

To be sure, Kennedy’s rhetorical campaigning and his unmistakable embrace of liberal causes and policies led to endorsements by some opinion makers on the liberal wing of the Democratic Party. For instance, Congresswoman Bella Abzug (D-NY) and Gloria Steinem, a leading women’s rights activist, supported his candidacy.109 Such endorsements, however, did not mark a complete erosion of Carter’s liberal base. The Rev. Martin Luther King, Sr., and Andrew Young,
Carter’s first ambassador to the United Nations, came forward to declare their support for the president’s renomination bid.110

The Carter campaign was clearly worried about Kennedy’s ability to undermine their candidate with the voters he badly needed. But Kennedy’s rhetorical campaign never proved to be an overwhelmingly attractive alternative to Carter’s policies and rhetorical stance.

Like Reagan, Carter ended the primary season as his party’s clear front-runner. By early June, Carter had tallied 1,964 delegate votes, almost 300 more than the 1,666 needed to guarantee him the Democratic nomination.111 The incumbent had won a total of 51.2 percent of the primary vote, while Kennedy, his closest competitor, had only 37.1 percent. In 1856, Franklin Pierce became the only president not to be renominated by his party. Despite the substantial odds, the Massachusetts senator was determined to fight all the way to the convention, where he and Carter would have to wage a heated battle for the liberal vote.